

Shooting Range at Chickahominy WMA

The shooting range at the Chickahominy WMA in Charles City County was closed this year from July 1 through August 31, 2007 for repairs and enhancements. When reopened on September 1, opportunities for handgun shooting were no longer offered, and many users of the range have asked us why.

The Chickahominy WMA was purchased by the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries to provide recreational hunting and for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing wildlife habitats and populations. In the 35 or more years since acquisition, the Department's primary focus has been to improve those habitats, enhance wildlife populations, provide hunting opportunity and also build a system of roads, gates and signs intended to support these functions. Secondary and compatible uses, such as fishing, boating and wildlife watching have also been encouraged and supported by the enhanced habitats and associated infrastructure.

In the mid-1990's the Department decided to use an unproductive section of the CWMA to construct its second shooting range in Virginia. The first, at the Amelia WMA in Amelia County, had been constructed ten years earlier, and is comparatively limited in size and use. The CWMA range is a larger facility than Amelia. It was intended primarily to provide hunters with a place to align sights on hunting firearms, which is entirely compatible with the WMA objective of enhanced wildlife habitats and populations.

While the CWMA range was being constructed, staff proposed expanding the amenities offered to include six to ten stations for handgun shooting. This was a new concept for a Virginia WMA range, as Amelia was and is limited to rifle and shotgun shooting. After completion, the range quickly became very popular with shooters seeking a no-cost and unregulated alternative to shooting clubs and commercial facilities. Over the years, however, handgun shooting substantially exceeded the CWMA's handgun range capabilities and available resources. In fact, it has grown to the level that it is no longer compatible with the primary purposes of the Chickahominy WMA.

The level of use at the Chickahominy handgun range became an important factor when DGIF designed and constructed four more shooting ranges across the Commonwealth. Each of these ranges is strictly intended for sighting-in hunting firearms, excluding handguns. The size, scale and schedule of operations for new ranges built on White Oak Mountain, Phelps, Gathright and Clinch Mountain WMAs reflects that intent. These facilities remain compatible with the primary management purpose of each of these areas – the enhancement of habitat, wildlife populations and hunting opportunities.

At Chickahominy, the Department attempted to offer a different kind of opportunity for shooters. Unfortunately, the result has created a situation that no longer is compatible with wildlife management. The proposed adjustment of operational schedule and use of the facility will restore that balance, and continue to provide sportsmen with opportunity to prepare themselves and their firearms for the many hunting seasons offered in Virginia.

While we cannot continue to offer handgun shooting facilities on our WMAs, the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries continues to offer technical assistance to other agencies and entities contemplating handgun shooting facilities. Our designs and site plans have been shared with several interested parties, including the group responsible for the recently completed Wakefield 4-H shooting ranges. We would be pleased to offer additional help to other agencies who may choose to create facilities for recreational shooting.

Thank you, and we hope you continue to enjoy using Virginia's system of Wildlife Management Areas.